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ABSTRACT

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What Can Family Involvement Contribute to Primary-Grade Writing Instruction?

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Abstract

Family Message Journals in which first-graders write to their families and receive a daily written reply, involve families in children's school literacy program. This paper focuses on four, representative case-study families' written replies to their children's messages. Analysis of the instructional functions realized through text structure and lexicogrammatical features of families' replies reveals how family members may have played a role in providing writing instruction. Results demonstrate that all four case-study families had the ability to skillfully scaffold learning to write through instructional feedback on children's messages and modeling of genre conventions. The immigrant family of English Language Learners, in particular, modeled powerful writing that sometimes pushed the boundaries of mainstream genre expectations. Results suggest that families, even those typically considered less capable of participating, have much to contribute to children's school literacy learning that may both extend classroom instruction and introduce alternative text models.

What Can Family Involvement Contribute to Primary-Grade Writing Instruction?

Learning to write involves more than acquiring knowledge of graphophonics and developing the fine motor control to represent that knowledge on paper. Learning to write also entails appropriating the forms and purposes for communication valued in one's culture (Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). Research and theory suggest that certain instructional conditions are central to children's learning to write in socioculturally-valued ways. Among the most important conditions are: 1) feedback on efforts to communicate through writing, and 2) the provision of text models.

Feedback acknowledges children's efforts and encourages continued practice, and it suggests how they might make their writing clearer by anticipating audience needs (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Elbow, 1981; Frank, 1992; Kirsch & Roen, 1990; Langer, 1986; Moffett, 1983; Ryder, Vander Lei & Roen, 1999).

Text models introduce children to the written genres that are valued in their culture. Genres serve particular social functions that are achieved through their text structure and lexicogrammar. Genre models exemplify how to use these linguistic resources to write in socially-valued ways that accomplish specific purposes (Bazerman, 1997, 1998; Chapman, 1995; Christie, 1989, 1998; Cooper, 1999; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Kamberelis, 1999; Kress, 1999; Martin, 1989; Rothery, 1989, 1996; Schleppegrell, 1998).

Specific text structures and lexicogrammatical choices are the building blocks that enable a writer to construct a text that will be recognizable and serve the intended function. For example, narrative, poetic and informational text structures differ and each has specific obligatory components (Kamberelis, 1999; Martin, 1989; Pappas, Kiefer & Levstik, 1995). These structures are then realized through the lexicogrammatical features which are selected and ordered in characteristic ways in each genre (Halliday & Martin, 1993; Kamberelis, 1999; Rothery, 1989). Models, as one aspect of instruction, are essential to helping young writers learn to recognize and employ the discourse features that make writing work as social practice (Christie, 1989, 1998; Martin, 1989; Rothery, 1989, 1996).

Providing Instructional Conditions:

Most often we think of teachers as the guides who provide the necessary feedback and models-- the "scaffolding" students need to move beyond what they can already accomplish as writers (Applebee & Langer, 1983; Langer & Applebee, 1986; Rogoff & Gardner, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). However, the value of family involvement for children's academic development and school success is well documented (Epstein, 1991; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Quint, 1994). Moreover, such involvement may entail more than awareness and peripheral participation. Family participation can involve learning from families (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Moll, 1992; Shockley, Michalove & Allen, 1995); like teachers, perhaps

families can scaffold learning to write.

Educators may assume that only families possessing the "cultural capital" of mainstream middle-class values will be able to contribute to children's school learning, or even care or know enough to become involved in their children's education in any significant way (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Wells & Serna, 1996). However, Moll (1992) challenges such assumptions, demonstrating that nonmainstream families that do not use English as a first language have much to offer to enhance school learning.

The Present Study

This paper reports on families' participation in their first-grade children's writing instruction through Family Message Journals. In these journals children wrote a message to their families each day about something they did, or learned or thought about in school, and a family member wrote a daily reply. Children's messages were written at school, about classroom activities and school events that families did not experience.

There is too little research on how families, especially those composed of immigrant, English Language Learners, or those across a range of socioeconomic groups, can do more than observe from the periphery or perhaps supplement the school-based literacy curriculum and instruction. We need specific examples of how families might, instead, become central to children's learning how to write. Exploring what families wrote in Family Message Journals when asked to respond to their children's texts on a daily basis, this study addresses the following questions:

1) How can families' replies be characterized?

2) How might their replies provide instructional feedback and models for children?

To answer these questions I analyzed replies for patterns in text structure and lexicogrammar that provided children with conventional models and repeated feedback about their messages.

Method

Setting and Participants

The study took place in a suburban Boston elementary school enrolling about 630 children. Though primarily Anglo, the school's student body includes about 7% African Americans, 3% Asians and 2% Latina/os. Most students come from middle-class backgrounds, but working- and upper middle-class children are well-represented.

The two first-grade classrooms included 48 students total. This paper focuses on the families of four case-study children. These four students-- Kristen, Kyle, Maryanne, and Sara-- were selected because they represented the full range of writing ability in the first-grade, and their families reflected a range of attitudes about school involvement. These three girls and one boy ranged in age from five to seven over the course of the school year. Two were emergent readers and writers, and two were beginning readers and writers as the school year opened. All of the children lived in families with two working parents in occupations ranging from construction work to investment banking; they represented the socioeconomic diversity of their classroom.

Maryanne's family is bilingual; her family had immigrated from Poland prior to her birth.

The teachers for each class viewed themselves as a "team" and regularly shared ideas and problems. They both considered families an essential part of the classroom community, and family involvement was part of the classrooms' culture. Many parents and guardians served as regular volunteers in the classroom, homework usually involved families, and Family Message Journals were central to the literacy curriculum.

The teachers assigned topics and genres or functions for children's messages to systematically introduce the first-graders to types of writing appropriate to different curricular areas (e.g. science experiments, social studies reports, or poems), to give them practice in using writing to learn across the curriculum, and to engage them in writing to accomplish social goals (e.g. to persuade or thank).

Before the children wrote each day, the teachers discussed the message with them, brainstorming content ideas and then composing a model message or part of one with the students' input. During this joint construction of a text (Rothery, 1989, 1996), the teachers often explained that certain word choices, language patterns or text structures might be more appropriate than others in light of topic and intended genre and function, but they also honored children's contributions. As the year went on, fewer model messages were constructed, but there was always brainstorming of ideas and usually discussion of linguistic

options before writing. Even when a complete model message was constructed, the children rarely copied it. Instead they drew upon it as a resource for language and content to be appropriated flexibly and sometimes recontextualized in their own messages, where they might focus as much on directly addressing and impressing their audience as on following genre conventions (Bazerman, 1997, 1998; Kamberelis, 1999; Kress, 1999; Lemke, 1990; Martin, 1999).

The teachers explained to families the value of writing back to children in their journals, reassured them that mastery of written English wasn't necessary, and used frequent letters to remind them that their participation was important and that a nightly response to the content of the child's message was expected. This clear expectation of involvement, regardless of families' educational backgrounds, was effective. Only 2 of 48 families failed to reply regularly in the journal. With few exceptions, the case study families replied to every message written, often rotating the role of respondent from one parent to the other, and occasionally to older siblings (in two of the four journals).

Data Gathering and Analysis

Qualitative data gathering included weekly participant-observation in one classroom from October through May; interviews with teachers, family members and first-graders; collection of journal messages and replies; and collection of related classroom artifacts (e.g. letters to families regarding Family Message

Journals and other activities and expectations, a weekly class newsletter, and materials used in conjunction with the study of message topics). The four case-study students' full, year-long corpus of journal messages (n=524) and their families' replies (n=512) were the key pieces of data.

This paper focuses on families' replies, but replies were not an initial focus of the study. It was only through careful analysis of the children's messages, and what they were learning through the Family Message Journal process, that I began to attend more closely to the specific roles of family replies. Although children's early writing has received considerable attention, families' writing to young children is under-researched. As a result, my analysis was exploratory, but I crafted a framework for understanding the instructional impact of family replies by building on research on learning to write, writing instruction, and textual analysis.

I began with comparative analysis of replies using open coding to allow patterns to emerge, leading to grounded theory with respect to reply function (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This first step of analysis revealed salient functions of families' replies, captured by preliminary codes such as: "acknowledging learning," "message impact," "questioning," "praising," and "modeling genre." I then considered these codes in light of the focus on how replies might have created instructional conditions--feedback and modeling-- viewed as important in the literature on learning to compose.

Because I was interested in families' instructional role, the analysis below includes only replies that provided instructional scaffolding through modeling genre conventions or offering instructional feedback. These instructional scaffolding replies accounted for 62% (n=316) of the total data. The other 38% of replies functioned either to simply provide positive feedback ("Your writing is so neat") and affirmation ("I know you are happy to have a new friend"), or to share family members' personal feelings and wishes, often in response to a child's question (e.g. "how douse sharing make you feel?") or a child's personal expression ("My wish for the world in 1997 is . . ."). Though these replies provided feedback, it was not instructional feedback in that it did not explicitly signal to children how their writing had impacted their readers or how it might be improved. Moreover, personal-feeling replies were often modeled after the children's messages, not vice versa, with a family member replying with what s/he wished for the new year or offering his or her own reaction to a book the child had responded to.

Of the 62% of messages that did provide instructional scaffolding, nearly all had a relatively clear primary function, determined by repeated reading to infer the intent of the reply as signalled by the amount of text and placement of clauses serving different functions. For example, the following reply offers some information at the end, but its primary function was judged to be sharing personal feelings about a story that Sara

had responded to in her message, in which Toad plays the violin for his plants to induce growth:

> Dear Sara,
>
> The stories about Frog and Toad are very funny. I like the garden one too. Some people think that plants grow better if you play music for them.
>
> Love, Mommy

This is not a text that models informational text structure, nor does it provide direct instructional feedback on Sara's writing.

Instructional scaffolding categories included: instructional feedback to children's messages (asking questions, acknowledging message impact, acknowledging learning) and modeling genres (informational text, jokes and riddles, narrative, moral lessons, and poetic text). These categories reflect how replies functioned as a forms of instruction.

Replies were brief (generally one to four sentences). When asked in interviews parents explained: "I didn't think I was expected to write more," "That's all I had time to write," and "That's about as much as I thought he could handle; he's only beginning to read." The replies' brevity limited the number that served dual functions, however 5% of the total replies were counted in two categories, for example, acknowledging learning and modeling informational text. Replies counted in two categories sometimes included one category belonging to the 38% that did not provide instructional scaffolding, so overlap was even lower than 5% in the focus data.

Once replies were sorted into the analytical categories of focus, I performed a more fine-grained analysis in order to determine how replies in each category realized their instructional scaffolding functions. In other words, what made them work, linguistically, as instructional feedback or models? I searched for discourse patterns across all the replies in a single category. Previous textual analysis research demonstrates that such patterns might exist at the level of text structure or in the lexicogrammatical features of a reply. Replies in each category were analyzed for similarities in text structure and for lexicogrammatical patterns.

Text Structure

Guided by the findings of previous research on young children's writing and borrowing established analytical categories (Kameberelis, 1999; Pappas et al., 1995), I considered how the family replies might support children's learning of text conventions. Among replies in each category I searched for characteristic obligatory and optional elements of narrative and informational genres (Pappas et al., 1995) and poetic texts (Kamberelis, 1999). I also looked for forms of organization that Lemke (1990) labels rhetorical structures or "minor genres." These shorter, simpler structural patterns include conventional forms of argument, description, joking, or teaching a lesson that may also be employed as components of "major genres." It is important to note that the structural elements identified are specific to the mainstream, Western text models that were valued

in the first-graders' classrooms.

Narrative text structure. Narratives include the obligatory elements of Initiating Event, Sequent Event and Final Event that present and then resolve the story's conflict or problem. An optional Placement may precede the Initiating Event, introducing the setting and characters; a Finale and/or Moral are optional closing elements.

Informational text structure. Obligatory elements include Topic Presentation, Description of Attributes, Characteristic Events (or activities or processes related to the topic), and Final Summary. Optional elements are Category Comparisons and an Afterward with additional information about the topic.

Poetic text structure. Though less well-defined and more flexible than text grammars for other genres, free verse poetry is structured around Line, Stanza, and Rhythm, which foreground the language itself as crucial to a poem's meaning and the reading experience.

Rhetorical structures. These components of the major genres include minor genres such as riddles or jokes, which must contain at least Question and Answer. "Knock-knock jokes" contain a series of Questions and Answers. As with poetry, language itself is a focus of attention in riddles and jokes, and the answer must contain an element of surprise, usually emerging from an unexpected or playful use of language. Other rhetorical structures include argument (thesis-evidence) and lessons (truth statement-implications). Rhetorical structure categories emerged

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from analysis of structural patterns in the texts.

Lexicogrammar

After structural analysis, within each category I analyzed replies by clause for lexicogrammatical patterns that establish text meaning and reflect genre conventions. These include: the experiential meaning of the clause as revealed through the grammatical choice of verbs of doing, meaning, or being; the theme of the clause; and lexical choices at the word, sentence and inter-sentential levels (Halliday, 1985; Kamberelis, 1999; Rothery, 1989).

Experiential meaning. What is going on in a clause is expressed through its grammar and verb choice. Doing Processes involve either behavioral or physical action; Meaning Processes can be mental (thinking, perceiving, reacting) or verbal (saying); Being Processes identify or describe participants (relational) or indicate their existence (existential). Each process centers around particular participants and the clause describes the participants who play a part in the process and how they do so.

Theme. Theme occupies the first position in a clause and a text develops from the theme. The choice of theme highlights a particular aspect of a clause and organizes the meaning of a text or text segment.

Lexical features. Lexical features include Verb Tense, Cohesive Devices such as temporal connectives, and the Specialized Discourse or devices of narrative (e.g. "once upon a

time"), informational text (e.g. precise, scientific terminology), and poetry (e.g. repetition, metaphor, simile).

Results

As noted above, replies fell into two major categories of instructional scaffolding for literacy learning (see Table 1). Fifty-two percent provided instructional feedback by asking questions about the content of messages; acknowledging the impact of messages; or acknowledging learning from children's messages. The other 48% modeled a range of genres: informational text; jokes and riddles; narrative; moral lessons; and poetic text.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

Below I elaborate on how these functions were realized through text structure and lexicogrammar. At the same time, these structural and grammatical features served as functional models for the first-grade recipients, demonstrating how to marshall language resources to construct texts that follow particular conventions and serve particular functions.

Within each category, patterns did not emerge in all features analyzed. For example, instructional feedback messages in each category had a common rhetorical structure but did not have a consistent pattern with respect to theme. I have highlighted those patterns that were identified, attempting to demonstrate why replies belong in the same category and how they functioned through their structure and lexicogrammar.

Asking Questions

Asking a question signalled that the reader needed more

information to fully understand a message or was curious and wanted to know more about the topic. Thus, replies asking questions indicated that writers need to provide enough information to satisfy their readers. These replies, accounting for 33% (n=63) of those that provided Instructional Scaffolding, were generally written in response to messages that told about a classroom activity or shared information learned. A small number were reactions to stories the children had written as journal messages. Family members asked questions about characters' appearance and disposition and about plot, indicating how the first-grade writers might elaborate to satisfy readers' needs.

A reply was coded as Asking Questions only if it grew out of an intent to elicit information or out of curiosity to know more about the topic or the writer's thoughts on it (e.g. "What do you think?"). Not all such replies followed standard question format, though most did. For example: "I wonder how Pickles [clown character in first-grader's original story] looks" was coded as a question because it demonstrated curiosity about the character. On the other hand, a few replies included clauses closing with question marks that did not necessarily function as questions. For example:

> Dear Maryanne,
>
> You worry too much about the art show, because you do not remember that the art show is simply a presentation of drawing, sculptures, and other pieces of art done by students of all schools in [town]. You liked it, when your

big sister was there. Remember?

For sure you liked all the pictures of animals there.

Love, Mommy

This reply affirmed Maryanne's fear and further suggested that she might in fact, enjoy having her artwork presented. "Remember?" functioned to emphasize that Maryanne ought not to be anxious, rather than to seek information or elicit her thoughts.

Text Structure

There was no consistent rhetorical structure for Asking Question replies. Questions were embedded within replies in various ways. For example, some replies consisted only of a simple question or two. When Kristen wrote about looking at mold under a magnifying glass and her mother replied:

10/29/96

Dear Kristen,

What did you see under the magnifying glass? What did the mold look like?

Similarly, Sara's father wrote many typical replies that consisted of a single question about his daughter's message:

10/7/96

Dear Sara,

Did Johnny Appleseed plant any other kinds of trees besides apple trees?

Love, Papa

12/4/96

Dear Sara,

What happens to the seeds [from pine cones] after they scatter on the ground?

Love, Papa

As the year progressed replies became longer, and sometimes introduced questions with a general statement of curiosity and followed them with related information as in this spring example:

Dear Sara,

I would like to know more about spelling baseball. Are homerun words very hard to spell? What is it like playing spelling baseball?

Pretty soon you'll be playing real baseball. I think it will be fun.

Love, Mommy

Another structure was to comment on the child's message and its topic and then move to a related question:

Dear Maryanne,

Your list of things that a seed needs is very precise.

I hope that our potato plant will grow very nicely, because we have given it every thing from your list . . .

But I wonder how it happens that some plants grow with very little of soil, water or space. Like in a little crack in the rock or between bricks or in the smallest crack in the pavement? How is it possible?

Love Mommy

The closing questions, beginning with the "I wonder" clause, reflect curiosity and also challenge Maryanne to think. Similar

thought-provoking questions were also embedded at the end of dually-coded replies modeling informational and poetic text structures; riddles included questions too, as discussed below.

Lexicogrammar

The theme of question clauses in Asking Questions replies always signalled uncertainty or lack of information (e.g. "What bear . . . ?" "What happens. . . ?" "Did he . . . ?" "Is it hard . . . ?"). The words in these clauses were organized to achieve interrogative mood (as opposed to the declarative "He did . . ." or "It is hard").

The experiential process of Asking Question clauses varied systematically. When a question centered around a thing (e.g. "How many teeth do you have?" or "What did the mold look like?") and there was a specific, possible answer that the first-graders could offer, the verbs represented being and doing processes. When the clause centered around generating and considering possibilities (e.g. "I wonder . . . " or "Cardinals are very pretty birds. How do you think they keep warm in the winter?") and the expected outcome was not a precise answer but thinking, verbs reflecting meaning processes, especially mental processes, predominated. These "thought-provoking" clauses differed also in that the active participant was not a thing or distant person doing something or being a certain way, but "I" or "you" wondering or thinking. Thus clause grammar generally signalled the type of question and what the first-graders were expected to "do" with it-- think on it or access learned or available facts

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to answer it.

Summary

The grammatical structure of Asking Questions replies indicated their goals. These replies modeled how to phrase and communicate a question depending upon one's purpose. Such models may be important because young children confuse asking and telling and do not always understand the difference between "What is that?" and "What do you think that is?", often using and interpreting such functionally distinct clauses interchangeably.

At the same time, Asking Questions replies provided instructional feedback by encouraging audience awareness. The questions families asked, especially those seeking specific information, demonstrated audience needs to the first-graders. These questions functioned much like those a teacher or peers might ask orally when providing feedback during a writing conference or sharing session. Once this type of question was encountered multiple times, it may have helped children recognize how to anticipate readers' needs in future messages.

Acknowledging Impact

The 11% (n=21) of Instructional Scaffolding replies in this category provided feedback by acknowledging the power of the first-graders' writing to influence others and accomplish goals. These replies were generally written in response to messages asking for something (e.g. books, videotape rentals, pets) or to do something (e.g. attend a special event, invite a friend to play). However, some of these replies were responses to

informative messages which sparked an idea for action. For example, starting a written family history:

Feb. 6, 1997

Dear Maryanne,

I am really impressed! You wrote so much about Abraham Lincoln! And I learned something new again!

I think we should start writing stories from our families history. Some day it will be interesting to read!

Love Mommy

Such replies to informative messages tended to have two sections (here paragraphs) and fall into two functional categories: Acknowledging Learning and Acknowledging Impact.

Text Structure

Replies in this category were characterized by a particular rhetorical structure: a thesis statement promising or proposing an action (usually at or near the beginning of a reply), followed by an argument (anywhere from one clause to several sentences) providing evidence for why that action should be taken. For example:

April 13, 1997

Dear Maryanne,

My answer is Yes. Yes, you will get the book you would like to have.

I think, that writing notes every day or so is good for you for many reasons.

First: you practice writing,

Second: you never forget when things happen,

Third: it is so much fun to read about yourself when you grow up . . .

Love Mommy

This reply reinforces the value of writing and indicates that the message has impacted Maryanne's mother-- she promises to purchase a blank journal for her daughter and gives reasons for doing so.

An earlier message in which Maryanne asked for "a noo dogee," received a similarly structured reply written by her father:

September 1996

Dear Maryanne!

We all would like to have a dog . . .

And we will try to get it next year . . .

Mommy and I hope that all of our house projects will be done so there will be time enough to care for a dog.

P.S. By the way I liked the "open house" at your school very much.

Love Dad

Her father acknowledged that a new dog was a good idea and vowed to try to get one, arguing for why next year would be a good time.

Even replies which did not promise a requested pet often proposed to explore the possibility:

Dear Sara,

Maybe we can look at some books to learn more about what

it's like to take care of a turtle at home.

Love, Papa

Again the proposal is followed by an argument for why "look[ing] at some books" is a good idea. Moreover, the occasional denial of a child's request demonstrated the same rhetorical pattern--it was always followed by an argument with reasons or evidence for why the request could not be met.

Lexicogrammar

The theme of the promise or proposal clause of Acknowledging Impact replies began with affirmation that the first-grader's message would result in some action on the part of the family (e.g. "you will get," "We will try," "we can look," "we should start". The promise or proposal statement always involved a doing process (get, try, look) with the child or entire family (you, we) as participant. The verbs (e.g. "will get" or "should start") also signalled a future action that was at least intended (try, should) if not certain (will, can).

Summary

Replies in the Acknowledging Impact category told the first-graders that their writing could influence readers' intentions and actions. The fact that replies usually promised to at least explore the possibility of fulfilling a highly-desired objective was evidence of how writing can empower. At the same time, the lexicogrammar of families' replies modeled how to write a text that signals future action, and the rhetorical structure modeled the minor genre of argument, demonstrating that it is important

not only to propose an action but to explain why it should be taken.

Acknowledging Learning

Accounting for 8% (n=14) of those responses categorized as Instructional Scaffolding, Acknowledging Learning replies expressed genuine interest in the first-graders' messages. These replies were always responses to informative messages and revealed an attitude of excitement about learning from the children and an appreciation for the new information they had offered. Replies in this category acknowledged the first-graders' ability to teach their families about what they were learning in school. As a typical reply articulates, families were genuinely informed by many messages: ". . . I never knew that calico cats are all girls! . . . I learn from you!"

Text Structure

Representative of a "minor genre," replies in this category demonstrated a common pattern: an opening statement acknowledging learning, followed by one to four sentences elaborating on the topic. For example, Maryanne's mother elaborated by restating what was learned and relating it to her life:

Jan. 29, 1997

Dear Maryanne,

I have learned something new from you today.

That groundhog and woodchuck are two different names for the same animal!

And I know very well what this cute animal likes to

eat!

Our tomatos! Do you remember "our woodchuck"?

Love Mommy

In another message she elaborated by expressing fear at the implications of her daughter's message:

October 20th, 1996

DEAR (BEAR) MARYANNE!

NO, I DID NOT KNOW THAT BEARS CAN BE THAT TALL! I REALLY DON'T WANT TO MEET A HUNGRY, 10 FEET TALL BEAR. O NO!

LOVE

Mommy

Less common was the way in which Kyle's mother elaborated, simply expressing appreciation for the information he had shared:

3/27/97

Dear Kyle

No, I didn't know that. Thanks for the information.

Love Mom

Lexicogrammar

Across Acknowledging Learning replies, the theme was similar: "I did not know that," "I have learned something new from you" or "It was fun to learn. . . " The family member who wrote each reply thus organized it around the fact that the child had successfully taught something through message writing. This is significant since such messages could just as easily have begun with new information or a personal connection to the topic and closed with "I have learned . . ."

It is also important to note that all of these messages placed the family member as the significant participant by starting with "I." Nearly all of the opening clauses of messages in this category begin with "I learned" or "I didn't know" not "you taught me." In a small number of messages this is the first clause of the second sentence. And each of these clauses centers around a mental process of meaning (learning or knowing) that has happened to the family member who is writing the reply. The past tense verbs (did not, learned) indicate that the writer is now enlightened.

Summary

Replies in this category provided instructional feedback by confirming that the first-graders had successfully communicated information through writing (and thereby impressed family members). Very occasionally a reply indicated that the communication had not been successful. For example, "I don't understand your message" or "I don't understand what you did. This too helped children learn how to improve their written communication by highlighting readers' need for explicitness. At the same time, the replies served as models for how to write well. Families demonstrated that it is conventional to begin with a statement that one has learned, and to elaborate on what was learned, what it means, or how one feels about it.

Modeling Informational Text

The 13% of replies in this category were generally, though not always written in response to informational messages; family

members appropriated the child's topic and developed more fully constructed, fleshed-out texts, often providing another perspective or describing another aspect of the topic. For example, when Maryanne wrote that "Washington Street, [local main street,] was named after George Washington!" her mother replied:

> Feb. 11, 1997
>
> Dear Maryanne,
>
> To give a person's name to a place, a street, or a building is very popular in the world.
>
> Most often these people did something very important and GOOD for their country or for all the people in the world (like finding a medicine for some illnesses).
>
> Love Mommy

Typically, this reply broadens the topic and offers more general information, in this case about a widely followed sociocultural practice. The content of Informational text replies was always factual; this was indicated by the replies' lexicogrammar, as I discuss below.

Text Structure

Replies in this category included at least three of the four obligatory elements of Informational Text (Pappas et al., 1995): Topic Presentation, Description of Attributes, Characteristic Events (or activities or processes related to the topic), and Final Summary. Replies sometimes included the optional elements of Category Comparisons and Afterward with extra information about the topic. The obligatory element most often missing was a

Final Summary; in its place was often an Afterward that made a personal connection with the first-graders' lives. For example:

Nov. 19, 1996

Dear Maryanne,

The answer to your riddle is: PILGRIMS.

Do you know, that in our times people, who leave their country and go to another country to make their home there are called "IMMIGRANTS"?

And you are a daughter of Polish immigrants!

Love Your Mama

This reply presents the topic (pilgrims), describes their attributes through characteristic events that define them, makes a comparison between pilgrims and immigrants as defined by their "times," and closes with an Afterward. Such a closing may reflect the dialogic nature of the message-reply exchange; typically informational texts are more monologic with an unknown, implied reader.

Another example also includes all elements, obligatory and optional, except a Final Summary:

3/11/97

Dear Sara,

You told me about lots of good things the wind does when it blows gently.

Sometimes the wind blows very very hard and is a hurricane or a tornado. A hurricane can blow sailboats out of the water and onto the land. A tornado is so strong that it

could lift up our whole house! I'm glad there aren't tornados in [our town]! Love, Papa

Here a different aspect of wind is introduced, the Attribute being "blows very hard" with Category Comparisons between hurricanes and tornados, both of which are defined by their Characteristic Events. The Afterward is a personal note clearly addressed to a familiar and physically close reader.

Lexicogrammar

Informational Texts are generally marked by the use of technical, or scientific, as opposed to colloquial terms. This was evident in informational family replies which used precise terminology (e.g. "tornado" and "hurricane" instead of "big storms") and frequently introduced and defined these terms (indicating that families knew they would be novel) by building on the terms already used in the child's message or earlier in the reply (e.g. wind blowing very hard is a hurricane, wind blowing even harder and capable of causing more destruction is a tornado). Such interlocking definitions are typical of informational texts (Halliday & Martin, 1993).

In some messages new technical terms were marked by the use of upper case letters as they might be marked by boldface in a textbook (Wignell, Martin & Eggins, 1993). For example, after Maryanne wrote a message about pine needles and how they "are covered with wax and stay green in the winter," mother and father paired up to write a reply:

Dec. 4, 1996

Hi Maryanne!

The pine tree PINE

The spruce tree SPRUCE

The fir tree FIR

The hemlock tree HEMLOCK

All these trees have needles and are green all year round.

So we call them EVERGREENS.

LOVE

Dad and Mom

This reply also exemplifies the use of present-tense verbs ("have needles," "are green"), typical of Informational Text replies. Such verbs suggest the abstract, characteristic, universal nature of the information shared.

Summary

Informational text replies not only modeled how to write informational texts, but also provided the first-graders with new information related to a topic that was presumably salient for them, as they had just written a message about it. These replies allowed families to share their knowledge of the world as well as model genre conventions. Moreover, these replies demonstrated techniques that characterize good factual writing in general, including the kind of elaboration on a topic (e.g. characteristic events and category comparisons) that gives writing depth and fullness.

Because so many of the children's messages were informational, yet the text models to which they are exposed in

school and at home tend not to be informational (Chapman, 1995; Kameberelis, 1999), families' replies may have been particularly useful models of conventional structure and lexicogrammar.

Modeling Jokes and Riddles

Jokes and Riddles, 13% of the Instructional Scaffolding replies, entail the type of language play that seems to come naturally to young children. Further, being "in" on a Joke or being able to answer a Riddle may give children an empowering sense of equality with older family members. Jokes and Riddles may also affirm closeness since one must know another well enough to trust that such humor and language play will not be offensive. For example, in response to a message about growing mold and looking at it under a microscope, Kyle's father joked about the condition of his son's bedroom:

> Dear Kyle,
>
> I think that mold escaped from your room! Please don't bring it back home, or else! Your Dad

Text Structure

Replies categorized as Jokes did not follow a single pattern for text structure though they were always just one or two sentences; Jokes were not embedded in longer texts. Usually the Joke was in the opening sentence, unless some background information was necessary to set it up:

> 4/29/97
>
> Dear Sara,
>
> Did you know that spiders have 8 eyes around the top of

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their heads? It's very hard to sneak up on a spider!

Love, Papa

Like this one, some replies taught new information in the process of making a joke.

Riddles adhered to a determinate structure, often beginning with "Knock, knock" followed by the series of conventional questions and answers (Who's there?" "X," "X Who?") as in this reply to a message about owls:

3/6/97

Dear Sara,

Knock knock

Who's there?

Hoo

Hoo who?

Are you an owl too?

Love, Papa

Or Riddles consisted of a single question, sometimes followed by the answer:

Dear Kyle,

What did the owl say when someone came to his door?

Who who who?

Love

Mom

Riddles were highly formulaic texts, whereas Jokes were less rigidly structured.

Lexicogrammar

A Riddle is often identifiable by its structure, or opening clause, as in single question riddles ("What did the X say/do when . . .?"), but the clue that a text is a Joke lies in its language. The language must signal that it is not to be taken seriously, often by tapping alternate, non-conventional or idiomatic meanings, as when Kyle's mother wrote: "Dad has the flu with a capital F." Jokes also demonstrated language play through understatement ("It's very hard to sneak up on a spider!") and absurd exaggeration ("I think that mold escaped from your room!").

Riddles, too, involved playing with the meaning and sound of words (e.g. "who" and "hoo") and sometimes personified non-human participants (e.g. mold escaping, owls talking). These features signal that a text is not to be taken seriously, but read for alternate meanings.

Summary

Although the first-graders very occasionally wrote Riddle messages at their teachers' suggestion, and sometimes incorporated Jokes into messages serving various functions, language play was not nearly as common in their messages as it was in families' replies. These replies modeled how to signal that language was meant to be playful, perhaps helping the first-graders learn to interpret as well as write such texts. Riddles and Jokes also indicated that families were having fun with participating in dialogue through Family Message Journals.

Modeling Narrative

Accounting for 9% of the Instructional Scaffolding replies, Narrative replies consisted of stories sharing past experiences and family history related to message topics. For example, replying to a fantasy story Maryanne had created about "a playn old show [shoe] who wonted too be special," her mother told a story, beginning: "When I was a little girl I had a special pair of shoes." Unlike children's Narrative messages, families' Narrative replies were not fictional.

Text Structure

Replies in this category unusually included the three obligatory elements of Narrative Text (Pappas et al., 1995): Initiating Event creating the story's problem or conflict, Sequent Event explaining the characters' attempts to solve the problem, and Final Event in which the problem or conflict is or is not resolved (Final Event was omitted from only two of the Narrative replies). Replies consistently included the optional introductory Placement, and sometimes included the optional Finale or Moral (one of these elements was always present when a Final Event was omitted).

A typical Narrative reply is a response to Maryanne's message about a science experiment to test what would happen when one quickly swings a pail full of liquid upside down:

Dear Maryanne,

When I was maybe 11 years old, I went to visit my relatives who lived in the country. My two cousins and I

went to buy milk from a neighbour. We had a small pail. When we were getting back home and the pail was full I played the same trick on my cousins. They thought that I will spill the milk! This was a first lesson for them about forces!

Love

Mommy

This reply includes: Placement indicating time (when I was 11) and setting (cousins' home in the country); Initiating Event (carrying milk in a small pail that was full); Sequent Event (full pail swung around, cousins feared a spill); Final Event (the trick worked, the milk did not spill); and Finale (cousins learned about physics).

Lexicogrammar

Because families' Narratives were personal narratives, the theme of the opening clause was usually "I" or "we," making the writer a central participant in the action. Temporal connectives were also common in the opening clause, helping to set the scene. For example, in response to a message silent e, the "magic" letter that can "turn a cap into a cape," Maryanne's father told the story of learning English as a second language:

December 18 96

Dear Maryanne

BEFORE WE CAME TO THIS COUNTRY, WE HAD NO IDEA THAT SILENT "E" EXISTS . . .

IT WAS FUNNY HOW WE HAD PRONOUNCE SOME WORDS WITH LOUD

"E" INSTEAD KEEPING IT SILENT . . . IT WAS FUNNNN TO LEARN ALL THIS "MAGIC TRICKS" AND WE ARE STILL LEARNING

DADDY

"Before we came" identifies the sequence of events and links "before" with the learning that took place after immigrating. Other common types of temporal connectives in Placement clauses included: "When I was little" and "When I was 11 years old."

Finally, as is conventional, past-tense verbs characterized families' Narrative replies (e.g. "I had a pair of the best mittens in the whole world . . . they were made of. . . I used them as pockets . . ." Past tense verbs contextualize a story and suggest its historical nature, as opposed to the universality and abstract quality of the present tense favored in Informational Texts.

Summary

The Narratives children wrote in their Family Message Journals reflected a belief that stories had to be "not true." This belief was confirmed in interviews: children explained to me that "a story isn't true." Families' replies demonstrated that Narratives need not be fictional, they can be a way to share and reflect on personal experience and family stories. Moreover, families demonstrated how to construct a conventional Narrative and how to choose language and grammar to signal that one is telling a story. The children saw many examples of this genre in their reading program, but families showed them how to craft a story from personal experience.

Modeling Moral Lessons

The 7% of replies categorized as Moral Lessons were usually responses to messages expressing a problem. For example, when the first graders discussed emotions, Sara wrote of anger at a friend's behavior. Her father replied:

12/9/96

Dear Sara,

Sometimes people do things that make us feel mad or sad without meaning to hurt our feelings. When this happens, try telling the other person how you feel. Maybe they will say they are sorry.

Love, Papa

As in this example, replies in this category implied affirmation of a child's feelings but focused on guiding their behavior.

Text Structure

Not a major genre, Moral Lessons did demonstrate a specific rhetorical structure. They consistently opened with a statement of truth about life or human nature (e.g. "Sometimes people do things that make us feel mad or sad without meaning to hurt our feelings") and followed with a lesson or moral as a guide to behavior (e.g. tell the person how you feel, they may apologize). Occasionally, Moral Lessons included a third element-- an explanation of why it is so-- following the opening truth statement:

04-10-97

Dear Maryanne,

Many, many people, even grownups like to brag about things. Most often to feel good about their . . . (whatever it is they brag about), and to get ATTENTION. And you know yourself how important it is to get it!

So, when your friends do brag, give them what they need, and go ahead and play!

Love Mommy

Most replies in this category, however, simply stated the truth and suggested appropriate behavior in light of that truth.

Lexicogrammar

The shift from the truth statement to the suggested behavior in Moral Lessons was always signalled by a grammatical connective, linking the two elements of the text. For example, the logical connective "so":

January 22 '92

DEAR MARYANNE!

GAMES ARE, AND ALWAYS HAD BEEN ABOUT WINNING OR LOSING

Sometimes TIE . . .

LIFE IS VERY ALIKE

SO: BE HAPPY WHEN YOU WIN

DO NOT CRY WHEN YOU LOSE

AND TRY TO LEARN WHEN YOU TIE

Winn Loose Tie DADDY

Temporal connectives like "when (this happens)" also signalled the move from universal truth to suggested behavior.

Present tense verbs (e.g. "are," "is," "be," and "do" in the

example above) predominated in Moral Lessons. These verb forms suggested that the statement of truth and the suggested behaviors were universal and enduring. Moreover, many of these verbs created an imperative mood ("be happy," "do not cry," "give them what they need") or were at least mildly imperative ("try telling" or "try to learn"), suggesting that these behaviors were the right or moral thing to do.

Summary

Moral Lessons not only demonstrated particular conventions of structure and lexicogrammar, they also taught values more explicitly and forcefully than any other type of reply. Like Informational Texts, they showed children how to write in a way that generalizes about human behavior and they modeled how to use language as a resource to urge action. Additionally, Moral Lessons demonstrated that writing can be useful for developing an understanding of feelings and seeking suggestions related to problems or concerns.

Modeling Poetic Text

The 6% of replies that were Poetic were nearly all examples of free-verse poetry with the exception of several brief rhymes. (For example, responding to a message in the form of a poem, Sara's father wrote: "I think that I shall never see/ A poem as lovely as you are to me"). Although the structure and lexicogrammar of free-verse Poetic replies modeled conventions of Poetic Texts, these replies also served multiple functions from informing, to asking questions, to promoting thinking, to

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affirming a shared experience. Nevertheless, Poetic replies were distinguished by their quality of directing attention to the experience of reading, to the language and format as well as the content of the reply.

Poetic replies encouraged the reader to enter into and experience the world of the poem (Kamberelis, 1999) by using striking imagery for example, to describe "our walk across the snowy playground": "Blue sky, sun, and snow covered with diamonds." As I first looked at them during preliminary analysis, Poetic replies tended to invite re-reading, sometimes aloud, to experience their structure, sound, and imagery.

Text Structure

Poetic texts are typically organized around a line and stanza structure, as opposed to sentences and paragraphs. These lines and stanzas "mark the content within them as both distinct from and related to adjacent" lines and stanzas and create "particular rhetorical and aesthetic effects" (Kamberelis, 1999, p. 420). A typical example from the families' replies is a response to a message about the first-graders' study of snowflakes:

January 21 '97

DEAR MARYANNE!

SNOW FLAKES ARE

LIKE

PEOPLE

There are NOT TWO ALIKE

Is it good or bad

Think about it and tell me tomorrow.

P.S. Snowflakes have six sides

How many "sides" do we have?

- good

- bad

- ....

- ....

Your Daddy

In this reply the parsimonious lines at the beginning slow down the reader to contemplate the simile, and the stanza structure divides the wisdom of the first stanza from the question of the second, marking these as distinct but related components. This example is also characteristic of how poetry often breaks "rules" and crosses boundaries by borrowing from other forms (e.g. the "P.S" usually found in a personal letter). Of course this fluidity of boundaries also reflects the duality of the replies as texts-- they are all letters to the first graders at the same time as they are other forms of text.

Another feature of Poetic Text structure is rhythm, as exemplified in a reply to a message about the change of seasons:

Spring is comming

You can tell

A week ago the lake was covered with ice.
last sunday we saw just very little ice on southern edge of the lake.

Spring is comming. . .

We will see how much our lake changes durring this week. . .

This segment of the reply creates a pattern of sound with the contrasting shorter and longer lines, the unexpected stanza breaks after a brief line, the use of ellipses to prolong a thought, and the repetition of "spring is comming," combining to create a sense of waiting and yearning through the rhythm.

Lexicogrammar

Though writers generally try to avoid repetition, using more varied cohesive devices in non-poetic texts, poems are characterized by syntactic repetition, a device that helps create rhythm and link ideas:

3/10/97

Dear Maryanne!

Bats are very nice creatures, although some of us do not like them . . .

. . . Probably because of some legends.

I like them because they are smart.

I like them because they are good to keep the ballance in our environment.

I like them because they catch mosquitoes and some

other pesti flies.

There are quite a few in the woods in our backyard.

Do you like them or are you affraid of them?

Love

Daddy

Here the repetition of "I like them because" creates a rhythmic pattern as well as a unity across lines.

Finally, poems are marked by special semantic devices including imagery, simile, and metaphor (e.g. "snowflakes are like people") that were found in some Poetic replies.

Summary

Poetic replies not only modeled structural and lexicogrammatical conventions, they also demonstrated that any topic can be featured in a poem and that poetry can serve many functions. Such models are important because children have relatively few experiences with poetry and often disdain the genre as "boring." In fact poetry can inform, excite, provoke thought and move to action, as some replies demonstrated. Finally, many features of poetry, such as attention to language and description, are characteristic of lively writing in general. Thus, Poetic replies modeled how to write well in many genres.

Discussion

Analysis of families' replies revealed patterns in their writing with respect to how it functioned and how the functions were realized grammatically. Though family members did not report that they were trying to teach writing, textual analysis

of aspects of their replies reveals that they consistently provided instructional feedback and modeling of genre conventions. These findings extend Moll's (1992) work, indicating that families have significant "funds of knowledge" to contribute, even though they may not be fully aware of the nature or possible impact of their contributions.

In fact, families often modeled genres that were uncommon in children's home and classroom reading experience (which privileged narrative text), thereby providing children's only regular models of other socioculturally-valued genres. Such models are often missing in primary classrooms (Chapman, 1995; Kamberelis, 1999; Christie, 1989; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Rothery, 1989, 1996).

Families also provided supportive but challenging instructional feedback on a daily basis, indicating how the first graders' writing was effective and also (through their questions and reactions) how it might be improved to achieve the intended audience impact (Frank, 1992; Kirsch & Roen, 1990; Ryder, Vander Lei & Roen, 1999). Thus, families extended the teachers' capacity to provide daily, substantive guidance in response to each child's writing.

Families' replies not only demonstrate how they can provide instructional scaffolding of literacy learning, they also reveal families' ability to adjust the content, format and complexity of their replies to children's changing abilities (Applebee & Langer, 1983; Langer & Applebee, 1986; Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976;

Vygotsky 1978). Though they may not have always been conscious that they were doing so, families usually composed replies so that they were manageable for young children who were emergent to beginning readers and writers. And throughout the year they gauged their replies to match the children's growing competencies. Early replies tended to be very brief and to consist of simple sentences Asking Questions or Acknowledging Learning or Impact. Family members also used very neat print and occasionally re-wrote when they realized a reply might not be legible for the first graders. Over time, handwriting became less painstaking, replies grew longer and sentences and concepts more complex. For example there were more open-ended, thought-provoking questions, and replies included more abstract information unrelated to shared experiences. At the same time, new genres were introduced; there were few true Informational Texts, Narratives, Poetic Texts or Moral Lessons until several months into the school year. In short, families seemed to know what the children were ready for and how to challenge the first-graders as readers and thinkers, without frustrating them.

As is evident in the examples discussed, families' replies were not always fully conventional. Some family members were still learning English and some native speakers had not mastered standard written grammar, spelling and punctuation. However, the first graders were widely exposed to Standard English conventions in their other required reading and writing.

It is also important to note that the families'

unconventional composition styles were not unlike the experimentation with form characterizing the work of acclaimed novelists, poets, and essayists who push conventional boundaries and expose their fluidity. In particular, poetry invites writers to break many of the "rules" of other genres-- words can be used in unexpected ways, writers can play with capitalization, punctuation, white space, and even spelling, and sentence fragments are not errors. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that the family of English Language Learners was the one that most frequently wrote poetic replies. Because poets are freed from the strict formal and mechanical conventions of narrative and expository writing, poetry may be naturally more comfortable to those still developing a command of English. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that Maryanne's father, who was far less comfortable with written English than her mother, was the family member who most often wrote poetic replies. Of course, this hypothesis suggests that his poetic turn may not have been deliberate but a serendipitous accident. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the power of his Poetic replies as models. It does suggest that educators may be misguided in assuming that non-English dominant families will have less to contribute instructionally when involved in a literacy activity.

Limitations

Although Family Message Journals were a fruitful context for studying the potential impact of family involvement on children's literacy learning, this was also a context that encouraged

hybridity. Whatever its form and function, each reply was also a letter-- one half of a written dialogue-- and families seemed to try to balance letter format and style with their other intentions. Hence, poems were introduced with Dear (First grader) and closed with Love, (Family member). Of course it is not unusual for contemporary poetry to also be letter-like, for example Nye's (1990) "Valentine for Ernest Mann. And many narratives are also framed as letters or diaries. Nevertheless, within Family Message Journals, conventional text features were often recontextualized to fit the purpose of supportive dialogue, a letter format, and the fact that the replies' audience was emergent and beginning readers. These realities along with the inherent flexibility of genres and their functions as social practice (Martin, 1999), resulted in few perfectly conventional text models. As Halliday and Martin (1993) argue language is a "dynamic open system" and Family Message Journal replies are no exception.

In addition, I can make no causal claims about the effect of families' replies on children's literacy learning. Although elsewhere I have explored growth in the children's messages over time (Wollman-Bonilla, 1999, 2000), this may be the result of multiple factors including the classroom teachers, other text models, and maturation. Teasing out the role of families' replies is difficult in this context, but it is clear that replies repeatedly modeled text features and functions and provided substantive feedback on children's writing. Classroom

observation showed that the first graders were very attentive to replies, reading them with great interest and excitement.

Finally, I did not systematically analyze individual families' reply patterns and not every family modeled a full range of reply categories (e.g. some never wrote Poetic Texts). At the same time, as a group the first graders were introduced to a wide range of texts when children shared their families' replies in the classroom. Their teachers sometimes took this opportunity to highlight certain aspects of the replies, trying to develop awareness of the functions and features represented by the analytical categories used in this study.

Conclusions

Despite the limitations of this study, results suggest that educators must seriously reflect on their expectations for family involvement. Families can provide one-on-one, individualized feedback and models that may impact children's literacy development. Moreover, these findings suggest that teachers as well as children may learn from families: family replies may demonstrate effective instructional modeling and feedback. Further research is needed to explore just <u>how</u> and <u>how much</u> families influence children's writing.

Finally, we must recognize that family involvement may complicate mainstream assumptions about writing. One of the arguments for explicit teaching of text conventions is to provide all children with the cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) they need to succeed in school and mainstream society

(Kamberelis, 1999). However, families may favor forms not valued in school, and may model experimentation, rather than conformity to discourse conventions. In the present study it was the immigrant, family of English Language Learners that was least conventional in replies. Consider, for example, the Moral lesson on winning and losing. This reply's unconventional format, punctuation and syntax reinforced its powerful message, even as it modeled certain other conventions. Different families may contribute to their children's learning in different, complex ways. Families may enrich children's mainstream classroom experiences with alternate text models and expectations for writing. This study reveals some of the complexities of family involvement by highlighting the question of how to teach children the mainstream forms that will empower them socially, while also nurturing their inventiveness and capacity to challenge conventions, qualities that may be rooted in and nourished by their families' rich literacies.

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Table 1

Categories Describing

Families' Instructional Scaffolding Replies

Instructional Feedback to Children's Messages		52% (n=164)
Asking Questions	33% (n=104)	
Acknowledging Impact	11% (n=35)	
Acknowledging Learning	8% (n=25)	
Modeling Genres		48% (n=152)
Informational Text	13% (n=41)	
Jokes and Riddles	13% (n=41)	
Narrative	9% (n=29)	
Moral Lessons	7% (n=22)	
Poetic Text	6% (n=19)	